

## West Courtyard

### Southern Exposure

A MEANDERING stone path leads through the west courtyard past a tranquil pond surrounded by cascading boulders. The sunny seclusion of the enclosed garden, protected from the elements and heated by light reflecting off the surrounding glass surfaces, creates a microclimate that is slightly warmer than the norm for Washington, D.C. The bright flowers, trees, and evergreen shrubs growing here are not usually winter hardy in this area—the garden features plants native to North America but normally found in the Southeast, the Gulf Coast to Texas and Mexico, or the Southwest. The unusual mix of plants gives a balance of textures and forms rarely seen in a Mid-Atlantic garden.

Among the featured plants are species that love wet soils and species that are drought-resistant, providing challenges to the Conservatory gardeners. Four small trees anchor the landscape. The loblolly bay (*Gordonia lasianthus*) is a native of swamps and moist areas of the southeastern United States. The loblolly has leathery, dark green leaves and produces large cup-shaped white flowers in midsummer. Another resident of swampy areas, the needle palm (*Rhapidophyllum hystrix*), has become rare in its native southern habitat, though it thrives as a landscape plant from the Gulf Coast to the Atlantic coast of South Carolina. It is considered to be one of the hardiest palms in the world. In the courtyard winter, the palm's tips turn brown, but the plant responds with hearty growth when warm weather returns. By contrast, the desert willow (*Chilopsis linearis* ssp. *linearis*) is accustomed to arid heat where it grows in the desert washes of the Southwest. Though related to the catalpa in the eastern United States, the tree has thin willowy leaves and a profusion of fragrant pale lavender trumpet-like flowers in the spring. The mescal bean (*Sophora secundiflora*), also known as the Texas mountain laurel, is another drought-adapted native of the desert Southwest.



(ABOVE AND LEFT)

**DESERT WILLOW**  
(*Chilopsis linearis* ssp. *linearis*).

In a sheltered corner of the Southern Exposure garden, the desert willow blossoms generously.

(OPPOSITE)

**THE SOUTHERN EXPOSURE GARDEN ON A BRIGHT SPRING DAY.**



(ABOVE AND RIGHT)

#### **SURVIVING THE COLD.**

The effects of cold and snow are ameliorated by the surrounding building and paving stones. Plants such as tussock grass (*Nassella tenuissima*) and the needle palm (*Rhapidophyllum hystrix*) survive and thrive.

(OPPOSITE)

#### **BLUE BEARGRASS TREE** (*Nolina nelsoni*).

Snow collects on the geometric spikes of the blue beargrass tree, an unusual occurrence for this native of the dry mountains of Mexico.



The evergreen foliage of the mescal bean is a backdrop to spectacular violet-blue flowers that grow in clusters and smell like grapes.

In an orchestrated coexistence, several western and eastern *Nolina* species provide interesting textures to tie together distinct areas of the courtyard garden. The most striking of these is the large blue beargrass tree (*Nolina nelsoni*) from the mountains of Mexico. Growing up to 15 feet, its spiky upright leaves differ from the trailing grass-like swirls of the other *Nolina* species. The two Texas varieties, the wiry Texas sacahuista (*Nolina texana*) and the wider-leafed Devil's shoestring (*Nolina lindheimeriana*), are popular ground covers known for their drought resistance and heat tolerance. Most *Nolina* species are native in the Southwest, but two of the three eastern species grow here alongside their western relatives. Both the Georgia beargrass (*Nolina georgiana*) and Britton's beargrass (*Nolina brittoniana*) from southern Florida are endangered, their sandy habitats disappearing to development. All of the *Nolina* species are distinguished by the fine serrated edges of individual leaves and the tall flowering stems that shoot skyward from their evergreen foliage.

In keeping with the emphasis on plant conservation throughout the Conservatory, many rare and endangered native plants star in this





(ABOVE AND CENTER)

**PITCHER PLANTS (*Sarracenia*) AND  
WHITE TOPPED PITCHER PLANTS  
(*Sarracenia leucophylla*).**

Curious and exotic pitcher plants are perched like sculptures on the boulders and along the path. Natives of southern seepage bogs, these carnivorous plants are kept in pots so they remain very wet. Pitcher plants trap insects in their long “throats” and digest them.

(OPPOSITE)

**TEXAS GAILLARDIA.**

Mounds of pink gaillardia (*Gaillardia aestivalis* var. *winkleri*) brighten the courtyard garden from summer through fall. This pink variety is related to a rare white wildflower that can be found only in one county in Texas.

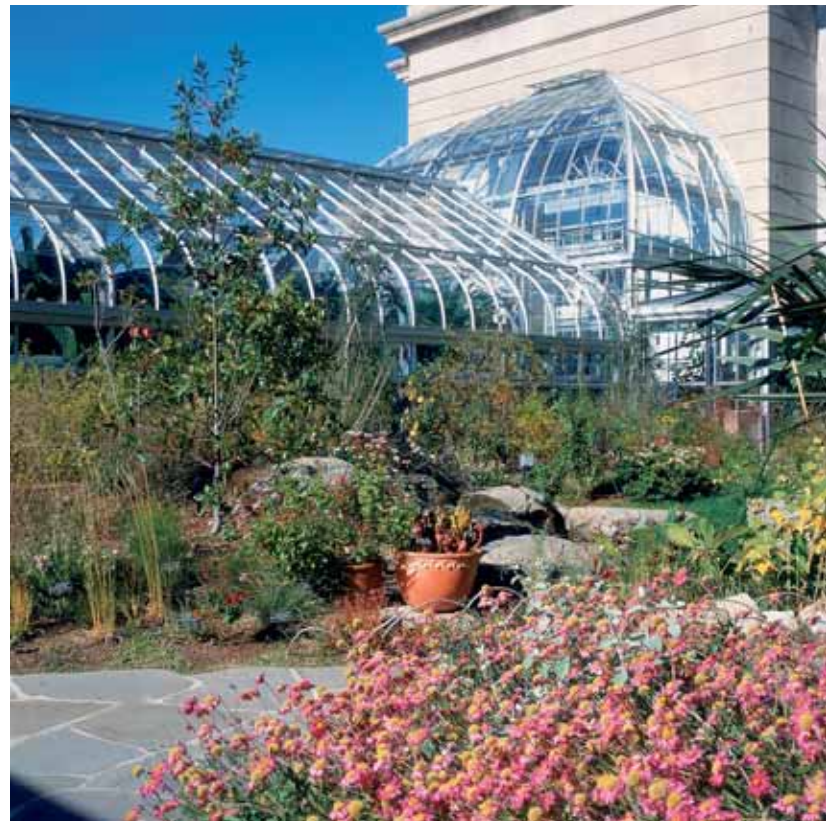


(ABOVE)

**GARDEN LIFE.**

All sorts of insects and animals thrive in the shelter of the Southern Exposure courtyard. Birds, hummingbirds, butterflies, and dragonflies are common visitors, while year-round residents include this frog, pictured in early spring as it awakens from hibernation.





garden. Examples include the Neches river rose-mallow (*Hibiscus dasycalyx*), a shrub that bears large white flowers with cherry red centers. It is now hard to find in its tiny east Texas habitat. The Alabama snow wreath (*Neviusia alabamensis*) is a shrub named for the clusters of delicate white and yellow blossoms that appear on its branches in April. Timber harvesting and development are threatening its home on the forested bluffs of the Cumberland Plateau. The Florida burrhead (*Echinodorus floridanus*) is a newly discovered species that grows in only two counties of the Florida panhandle. A member of the water plantain family, it produces showy three-petaled white flowers on tall wand-like stems.

Among the annuals that brighten the garden during summer and fall is phlox (*Phlox drummondii*), a native Texas wildflower that has been cultivated to yield simple, bright blossoms in shades that range from white to pink and red. Dune sunflowers (*Helianthus debilis*), native to the sand dunes of South Carolina to the Gulf Coast, grow in low mounds that produce a profusion of bright yellow flowers. Shocking orange California poppies (*Eschscholzia californica*), growing as tender perennials or annuals, depending on climate, appear here in both the spring and the fall.

